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Do Iowa School Districts Need Content Standards Set By State Law?

Usually when the subject of education "standards" is debated and critiqued, it becomes clear that "standards" is often misunderstood by many, both inside and outside the state.

Iowa does indeed have standards for curriculum, school operations, teachers, and content – all in place - but established at different levels of authority within Iowa. Some have been established by the legislature, others by the State Board and yet others by local boards of education.

Content standards outline the clear and concise expectations of the skills and content knowledge students need to demonstrate at a given age. These are the standards most often criticized by national reports – but not because of the quality of the standards, but rather on how they are set. In Iowa, content standards are required by law to be established by local school boards. But in order to meet the NCLB requirements, the Iowa Department of Education worked with the Iowa Testing Program to establish core content standards that districts must incorporate into their local standards. All local districts have devoted literally thousands of hours to the establishment of content standards to assure compliance with NCLB.

In addition to content standards, we have many additional education standards here in Iowa, including: standards by which schools are approved to operate, standards that are used to license teachers, standards for teaching, and standards that establish what content must be taught or offered at each grade level.

It might help to think of "standards" as "expectations." We do have many different types of standards in Iowa because we want our schools to have high expectations of students but also to assure quality teachers and quality environments to learn. Student achievement measures show that students are learning and are competitive with their peers nationwide: our Iowa Tests scores are far above average, our college prep scores consistently rank among the top three in the country, and our graduation rate is among the highest in the nation.

Changing who determines content standards at this time could completely dismantle the thousands of hours districts have already devoted to this task, and also disrupt our accountability system approved by the federal government. Also, being able to add and change content standards at the local level provides local boards the ability to both demand and create higher standards without a bureaucratic process that tends to slow the pace of change.

Of course Iowa education can and should make improvements, but let's focus on areas that:

- increase student learning opportunities,
- provide challenging curriculum,
- implement standards with quality instruction, and
- set and maintain high expectations for every student.

We must always work to improve our schools, our teaching, and our learning environments – we must challenge our students, provide them the very best teachers, give them the resources they need to do the job, and engage parents and communities. Our Iowa students deserve no less.

Submitted by:

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